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See the world - Be a librarian!

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Have you ever wanted to work overseas as a librarian? There is a wealth of opportunities abroad, as you can use your MLS degree and skills in ways that may not be possible at home. If you have aspirations to teach, you can offer American or western perspectives to European library schools, particularly those in Central and Eastern Europe. Consulting is a great way to go, with money now available thanks to the European Union, and libraries can certainly use advice on everything from building outreach programs to teaching librarians how to search electronic databases.

Western-educated librarians bring a variety of skills to Central and Eastern European libraries. We're trained in the latest technologies; we design web pages and digital libraries; we're unafraid of search engines, electronic databases, OCLC, and barcode readers; we understand the complexities of consortia. A lot of those things are new to many Central and Eastern European libraries, for which electricity and a supply of books may have been a more pressing problem in the not too distant past than accurate circulation statistics. They definitely have a need for people to help teach them how to build these skills or even help point out issues and concerns that they may not have thought about yet. "Soft skills" are our strongest asset. Public service is ingrained into our psyche – we leave library school with a strong customer service orientation and the willingness to listen to people, identify their needs, and offer services to meet those needs.

The Eastern European model of librarianship is remarkably different than the American or Western European model. Most libraries under Soviet control were little more than depositories of government documents and cultural artifacts. Librarians were trained as catalogers but unable to offer much assistance in regards to reference services. Now, users are taking more control of their information needs and librarians are adapting to the sudden pleas for help from their patrons.

My Experiences in Europe

When I graduated from the University of Illinois as a newly-minted librarian, I wanted to fulfill a lifelong dream of spending a year in Europe. I asked my professors to send letters to colleagues in Europe asking if they could use the skills of an American librarian for one year. I received two good responses – one from Warsaw University, who required an English-speaking librarian to edit their English language library journal, and one from a small college in Hungary who was impressed by my experience working in public services. Ultimately, I accepted the Hungarian offer because Hungary's visa requirements weren't as stringent as Poland's.

The Hungarian college offered many opportunities to sharpen my skills. Almost immediately, I found myself teaching in their library science program. In most of Europe, library science degrees are offered at the undergraduate level and many

instructors have only the MLS. Thus, I found myself suddenly qualified to teach! I was asked to teach “Digital Libraries” for no reason other than I must have had more exposure to digital libraries than any of their faculty. I was also asked to teach American Studies, which was a challenging but fascinating experience too.

If English is your native tongue, then you’re in great shape for working in Eastern Europe. A Hungarian library professor asked me to co-teach a continuing education program for librarians on “Special English for Librarians and Information Managers.” We assembled several class sections of librarians from public, academic, and special libraries from all over Hungary and improved their knowledge of English as it related to libraries and library issues. The ultimate goal was to develop their library-related vocabulary so they could communicate with vendors and develop contacts among western libraries. We also discussed trends in American and Hungarian librarianship and talked about technology, social problems, and improving services to under-served populations, like Romanies (Gypsies), the physically disabled, or the elderly.

Word got out fast that a western librarian was in town! I assisted the academic librarians with collection development on behalf of their English Language and Literature department and trained librarians and students how to search English language databases and search engines in the college libraries. I gave a lecture to a chamber of commerce on how librarians can assist entrepreneurs and small business owners with their information needs. I helped public libraries identify automation systems that could meet their circulation and cataloging needs.

Soon, I had opportunities outside of Hungary. In Slovenia, I helped librarians improve their reference skills by videotaping their practice reference interviews and having them observe their techniques. In Croatia, a university librarian complained to me that her librarians didn’t believe their students required much assistance because they never approached the staff. I helped her design a study to observe students’ behavior at the Online Public Access Catalog terminals and proved to the staff that students merely walked away empty-handed when they couldn’t easily locate the information they needed in the OPAC. Staff soon learned to approach students and question them about their information needs.

By the end of my year, I had traveled throughout Hungary and to Poland, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Denmark, Spain, Czech Republic, and North Africa. Not everyone I met or worked with spoke fluent English! I frequently relied on the help of a colleague who translated for me, or I practiced my very rusty German. But don’t let the language barrier scare you off – more and more people around the world are learning English, and a native speaker is highly prized in non-English speaking nations. Be sure to learn some of the local languages. You’ll impress a lot of people, and now I can order meals or ask directions to the bathroom in about a half dozen different

languages.

Finding Jobs in Europe

Clearly there's a lot you can do as a librarian in Europe. But how do you find work? Writing to libraries is a good place to start. The national libraries in each country can be very helpful. EUROLIB and the International Federation of Library Associations can also provide contacts with local library communities. In the U.S., the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs is a great resource for providing contacts with Central and Eastern European library schools. Professional organizations offer a lot of contact with overseas libraries too. Join ALA's roundtable for international affairs and learn about the plights libraries face in undeveloped and underdeveloped regions. SLA has international connections too; for example, an Australia & New Zealand chapter was recently founded, providing excellent connections to our colleagues in far-flung corners of the globe.

...And Outside Europe?

You'd be surprised by the number of opportunities around the world. International organizations invest a lot of money in aid to undeveloped nations. Many of the recipients, such as the Afghan Information Resource Center, can offer temporary assignments with wages derived from foreign assistance. A number of embassies, cultural centers and military installations advertise for librarians on their websites. Recently, the US Embassy in Israel advertised for an US citizen with an MLS to manage their library. Similarly, the US Army advertises for civilian librarians at www.usajobs.gov.

But They Can't Pay My Way!

What if a library has responded and wants you, but they can't pay? Money is always a problem for every library, no matter where it's located, right? Not necessarily. The European Union has a mandate to provide funding for the development and improvement of libraries in its new member states; libraries can request grant money to pay for your time and expenses. The amount of money they offer you may not sound like much at first, but be aware that the cost of living in Central and Eastern Europe is far below western standards! A reasonably sized, fully furnished and modernized flat in Budapest cost less than 300 USD per month. If the library can't secure funds, you can still get there – the State Department's Fulbright Program and the Institute of International Education have special grants reserved for librarians and library science students to pursue research and study opportunities in some countries, particularly Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Don't Forget Your Passport!

There are a lot of opportunities in international librarianship. National libraries, professional organizations, and government agencies are a good place to start your job search. Be patient because you might have to wait a while to secure funding. Don't be discouraged, however. Working overseas can be one of the most rewarding and exciting experiences of your life.

About the Author:

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